

Opening Address
Senator Michael R. Gibbons, President Pro Tem
First Regular Session, 93rd General Assembly
January 5, 2005

Lt. Gov. Maxwell, Lt. Gov-Elect Kinder, Judge Limbaugh, Judge Snyder, members of the Missouri Senate, friends, family and fellow Missourians:

The people of Missouri stand at the threshold of a time of great opportunity. It will be up to us to lay the foundation for this exciting future and make our state government work for the people to improve the lives we all live in this great state.

During the elections and afterward, a great deal has been said about how divided we are, some saying that there are two Americas, others that deep divisions will prevent us from moving forward. In Missouri's history, we know about deep divisions. As a border state during the Civil War, brothers took up arms against each other, and the violence and bloodshed in Missouri was great.

Thankfully, today the things that separate us are far less extreme, and it would do us well to recall what Abraham Lincoln reminded us about creating divisions – that a “House divided against itself cannot stand.” Moreover, the state seal of our great state echoes this theme: “United We Stand – Divided We Fall.” We must be united in our desire to make sure that the people of Missouri have jobs and an opportunity to succeed; that our children have good schools and get a great education; that we have access to quality healthcare; that our roads are safe and our transportation system strong; that our tax system is fair and generates the money necessary to fund critical functions in a way that is simple and without a great burden; that waste, fraud and abuse in Medicaid is eliminated.

There will be disagreement about how to achieve these objectives, and these differences should be debated vigorously, amendments offered and votes cast so that we can do the job of expressing the will of the people and take action to improve the lives of Missourians.

We have seen a massive change in Jefferson City. In 1992, when a number of us were first elected to the House of Representatives, Gov. Carnahan was elected after 12 years of Republican governors. He brought with him a huge Democratic majority in the House and Senate.

This year's election was the exact opposite - Gov-elect Blunt was elected after 12 years of Democratic governors and brought with him huge majorities in both chambers of the General Assembly.

Moreover, the political landscape has changed dramatically in the last 4 years. Republicans have grown from a minority of 16 members in the Senate in 2000, to a majority of 23 today. This majority expanded to include the House Republicans in 2002 as they gained their first majority in decades, and now we have a republican governor. This is the first time in 84 years that Republicans have been in this position, and only the fourth time in Missouri history.

The other great change has been term limits which the people adopted in 1992. The last of the long serving members of the Senate finished their service in 2004 where the longest serving members had been in the legislature for 42 years and had served in the Senate for almost three decades. Today, the longest serving members in the Senate have been here 6 years, and both of them will be leaving soon.

The Senator from Phelps will be leaving to become the next Treasurer of the State of Missouri. The Senator from Jefferson will be leaving to take over as City Administrator for the City of Festus. They join our friend and next Lt. Governor of Missouri, Peter Kinder, in continuing the tradition of leadership for Missouri coming from the ranks of the Senate.

It is into this body of leaders that we welcome our 11 new members. You are now part of a strong tradition of leadership and I challenge you, in this time of great change, to honor this tradition by helping us lead so that the people of our state can lead better lives.

With all of this change, we have the opportunity to shape how this Senate will work. We have the opportunity to work together to find solutions and get results for the people. The Senate is the place for deliberate debate, to explore the issues, and respect every Senator's right to be heard and to impact legislation.

But, this is not the place for delay for the sake of delay, or obstruction for the sake of obstruction. The people spoke in November, and now its time to get something done. There will be no tyranny by this Majority, nor can there be a tyranny by the Minority if we are to do the peoples' work and find solutions to the issues facing our State.

We all have run for this office with the hope and desire to make things better for the people of Missouri, and I applaud the Senator from the 5th, our Senate Minority Leader, for her leadership and interest in restoring civility to the Senate and for working hard to find solutions. She has said that it is now our "opportunity to make things work for the state." And that is what we are ready to do. The Senator from the 5th and I are committed to putting the people of Missouri before politics, and we urge you all to join us.

The voters on November 2nd sent a clear message – We want change. We want action. We want results. We want an end to the gridlock between the governor and the General Assembly. Voters, your message has been heard.

This year, we will pass tort reform in Missouri and see it signed into law. High malpractice premiums have caused doctors to leave the practice of medicine or move to another state. This loss of access to quality health care must stop. The loose provisions on venue have allowed lawyers great success in "shopping" for a place to file their lawsuits like the City of St. Louis where the chance of winning is greater and the money awarded larger. This litigation lottery must end. The failure to solve these issues reduces access to quality healthcare and increases its cost, so that we pay more for less care. Furthermore, our civil justice system makes it less likely that businesses will locate or expand here, costing us jobs and opportunities. This must change.

The issue is about balance. The person who is hurt should have their day in court, while the person who is sued should have a fair opportunity to defend themself.

Doing so will mean a better way of life for all Missourians. We must succeed.

Workers compensation reform is another issue likely to have early action. Simply put, when an employee is hurt, and the injury is caused by their work, he or she should be protected and compensated for their loss, but when work is not the cause of the injury, the employer should be protected from these claims and the higher premiums they cause. When this system is in balance, it's good for the workers and the employers. When it is out of balance in favor of the claimants, it undermines the benefits, increases costs, makes our state less competitive and the people lose out on jobs and opportunities. If it gets out of balance in favor of business, it can make the workplace less safe. We must strike the right balance.

School funding is an issue that we have not yet addressed. It must be tackled. It will be difficult. The school funding formula that distributes state tax dollars to elementary and

secondary schools is broken. A lawsuit has been filed challenging the current law, but it is not the role of the courts to establish how this money should be distributed, rather, it is ours – the Legislature’s. School funding is a great challenge because each area, each district, each school, and even each student, has different needs and desires, which can turn this issue into the legislative equivalent of a food fight. It will be up to us, the Missouri Senate to lead the way on this complicated issue, which affects the education our children receive, the cost paid by the taxpayers, the strength of our state’s economy and our future. We must find the right balance so that all of our children, whether they are from rural, suburban, or urban areas; from small or large districts; have an equal opportunity for a great education.

And while our state’s economy is improving, we still have many budget challenges ahead. Governor-elect Blunt has said that his administration will look at change and efficiency to make sure we are good stewards of the taxpayers money and we spend it effectively for the benefit of the people. We look forward to working with this administration in crafting a balanced budget that protects the taxpayers while providing adequate funding for critical functions of government. The appropriations process sets the priorities for the coming year and, in this effort, we must succeed.

Many other issues will come before us this year. The work will be difficult. The hours long. We all have family and friends that have made substantial sacrifices in order for us to serve. Let’s recognize them now.

I also want to thank the voters of the 15th Senatorial District for returning me to the Missouri Senate, and I thank you, my colleagues in the Senate, for electing me to serve as your President Pro Tem. I am honored and humbled by your confidence as we enter these exciting and historic times.

My goal for the Missouri Senate, working together with the House and Governor, is to lead our citizens to their best days ever. My door will always be open to you, as we strive in this chamber to do what is right for the people of Missouri.

I also want to say a quick thank you to Judge Snyder. I grew up around the corner from him and he was our State Representative. More importantly, he has been a great mentor, a role model, and a friend. When I was first elected to Kirkwood City Council, he swore me in in 1986, and I am thrilled that he was able to be here today.

The first time I was ever in this magnificent Capitol was as a 10 year old on a fourth grade field trip to Jefferson City from Pitman Elementary School in Kirkwood. I remember the day very clearly. We met Governor Warren Hearnes, Secretary of State James Kirkpatrick, and visited the House and Senate. I had a great time and knew that I wanted to come back some day.

When I finally came back it was in January of 1993 as a newly elected member of the Missouri House of Representatives, in the minority party, number 160 out of 163 in seniority. I was lucky to have an office. I never thought on that day I would be standing here before you as part of an historic effort to put Missouri on the right track for the 21st century. We are all here because we share a dream, a dream that the lives of Missourians can be better and that we can do something about that.

Earlier we recognized our friends and families with a round of applause. Better than applause, let’s recognize their sacrifices, as well as the trust the voters have given to us, by working together to lay a solid foundation for the future of the people of this state. We must build a future of hope and opportunity. A future that affirms that the American Dream is alive and well in Missouri. A future no matter who you are; your color, your gender, where

you begin, or how old you are; if you work hard, and relentlessly and honorably pursue your goals, in our Missouri, your dreams can come true.

So, let's work together so that every Missourian will have the opportunity to pursue their dreams with the hope of success, to improve their lives and make our state the best place in America to live, work and raise a family.